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Function and Decoration, Tradition and Invention: Carnegie Libraries and their Architectural Messages

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This study explores the changing value attached to historical references in modern public library design through examples cast in an era of transition. Pittsburgh was the crucible of Carnegie Library design; the city in which Andrew Carnegie manufactured his fortune making steel and where his philanthropic transaction with working people was most obvious. The last two of the eight branch libraries he built in Pittsburgh, South Side (1909) and Homewood (1910), illustrate apparently divergent approaches to library identity. Their decorative language can be misrepresented and misinterpreted and it is important to recognize the functional role that architectural ornament played in the context of modernity. Historic architectural references were used to invent new narratives for public interaction. The places in which these appear to be most conventional therefore often reveal themselves conversely, to be the most radical.

Keywords: Carnegie libraries, library architecture, modernism, Pittsburgh

Introduction

Pitching the architectural identity of public libraries and of public buildings more broadly throughout the twentieth-century has raised doubts concerning the imposition of social decorum expressed through reference to particular architectural styles (Figures 1 and 2). Professional architects working for professional clients with social roles, such as doctors, librarians, and educators, sought to disassociate themselves from the legacy of Victorian paternalism. Critically, they sought to move away from the use of architectural ornament as a visual means to dispense cultural identity from above. A 1938 drawing by Lubetkin and Tecton for the Finsbury Health Centre in London (Figure 3) draws a caricature of the familiar Edwardian brick dressed with stone 'Queen Anne Style' to which a very large number of the Carnegie Libraries in Britain subscribed. It labels the ornamented facade as 'POMPOUS!' 'OLD-FASHIONED' 'PRETENTIOUS!' To a great extent, this reading of many turn-of-the-century library buildings has endured.



figure 1 Southside Library. Courtesy of Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.

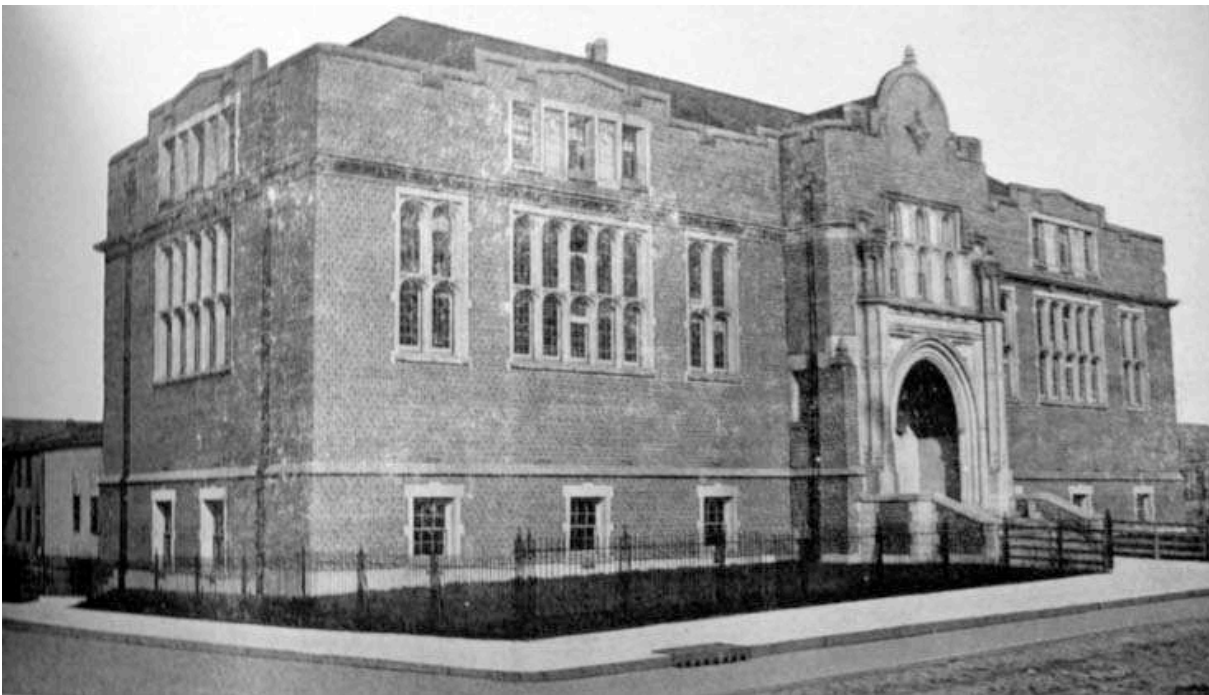


figure 2 Homewood Library. Courtesy of Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.

Librarians and their architects continue to seek the means to shake off the trammels of traditionalism and find the means to excite the next generation. This rejection is somewhat generalized in its emphasis because it refers to such a very large number of similar looking institutional establishments erected during the era of 1880–1910. It is for this reason that it is particularly important not to overlook the more peculiarly precise evolution of Carnegie Library design.

In his article 'Modern and Post-Modern Architecture', Habermas denounced late nineteenth-century requirements to build schools and libraries as 'conventional tasks', in terms of their impact on cities, by comparison with public transport infrastructure networks.¹ Ironically, the connection to railway engineering in the production of Carnegie's fortune and the very environment in which these buildings developed highlights that the two generating contexts were closely intertwined. It causes us to examine whether the developing conventions for designing these library buildings were as unsophisticated as they might at first appear and whether in fact their freedom with historical architectural quotations relates more closely to a self-conscious postmodern mindset.

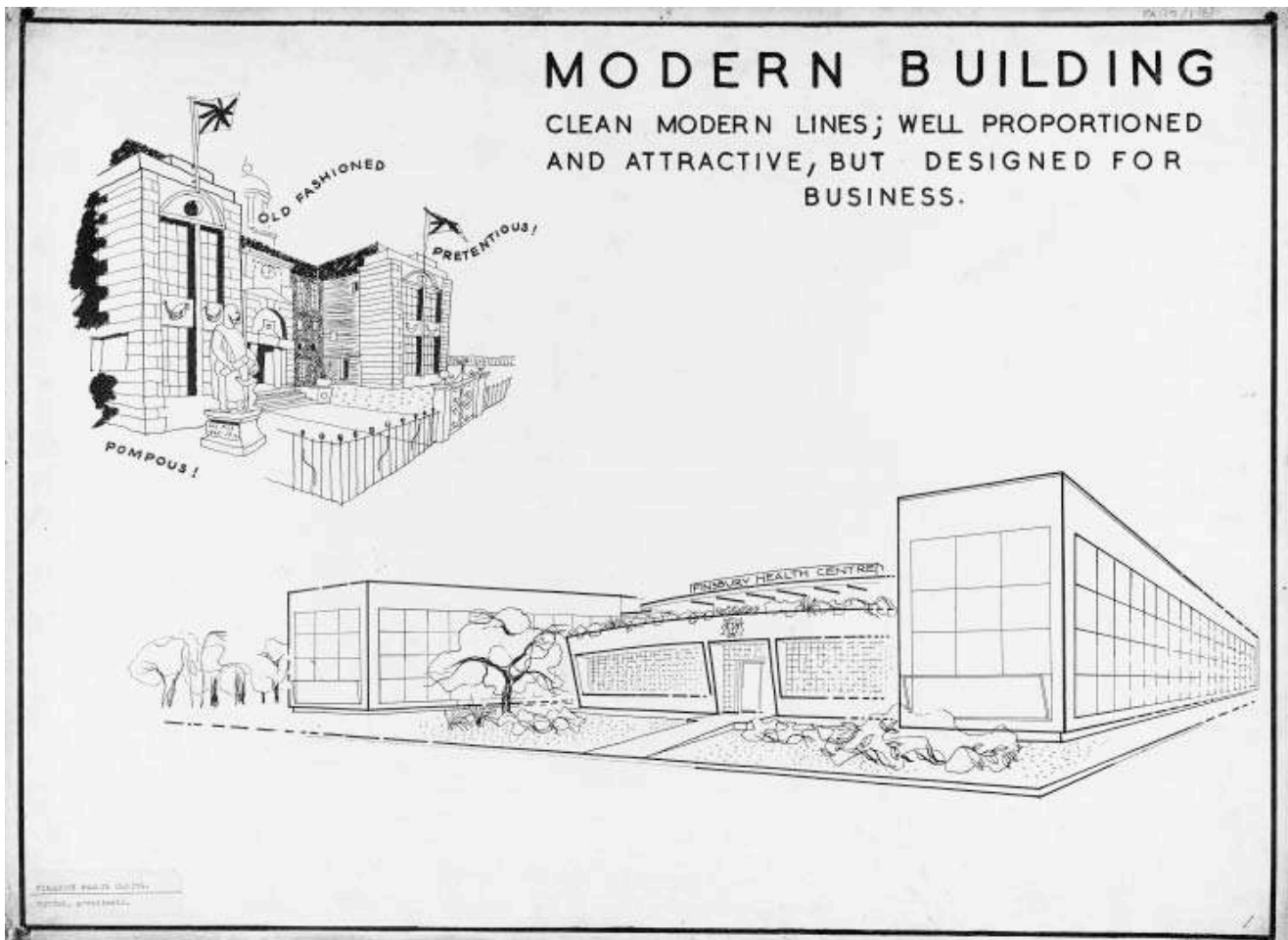


figure 3 Lubetkin and Tecton, 'Modern Building'. Explanatory drawing for the Finsbury Health Centre (London, 1938). Courtesy of RIBA, Library Drawings Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the increasing ability to plagiarize various architectural styles weighed heavily upon contemporary architectural theorists. The Deutscher Werkbund, or German Work Federation, brought together architects and industrialists and as a precursor to the Bauhaus was key to the development of modern architectural thought. Its founder, Hermann Muthesius, wrote in 1902: 'Every borrowing of old or foreign precedents in architecture harbours the danger of inducing formalistic misdirections'.² His writings are relevant here in that they are contemporary with the emergence of Carnegie library buildings but also in that they are concerned with both industrialization and also the manner in which ornament in architecture may articulate certain messages to the beholder.

Muthesius raised the issue of architectural costume and reflected upon changing codes of social dress. He discussed how the use of clothing to distinguish social rank was eroding, remarking that a 'King' no longer dressed in uniform to reflect his social stratum, but that he now wore the clothes of the 'Burgher', or ordinary man. This theme was developed to relate to architecture: 'instead of developing purely external ornament that stands in no immediate relation to the essence of the thing, we now strive decisively toward functional design'.³ Adolf Loos, although ostensibly rejecting the Werkbund, still referred to personal costume with regard to architecture in 'Ornament and Crime', writing in 1908: 'Anyone who goes around in a velvet coat today is not an artist but a buffoon or a house painter [...] freedom of ornament is a sign of spiritual strength'.⁴ The two comments reveal how tightly engrained concepts of social hierarchy portrayed through personal appearance were in fact still tied to modes of architectural reference, of presentation, self-consciousness, style, and articulation.

Rapid technological progress provided an increasing ability to imitate anything anywhere; to cast hundreds of ornate decorative urns in iron or clay, rather than carve one in stone. Concerns with the crisis in changing modes of production brought on by the 'advancement' of the industrial revolution stimulated movements such as the Deutscher Werkbund in Germany and the Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain. Walter Benjamin's 1930s reflections on authenticity expanded key theoretical threads for the twentieth-century modern identity.⁵ At the end of the century, however, theorists reflected on the 'aesthetic popularism' of postmodernism, in which as Jameson has noted, 'they no longer simply "quote" as a Joyce or Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their very substance'.⁶ It may be that these early Carnegie library buildings are better viewed as precursors to such perspectives than in relation to their contemporary thinkers. This study does not seek to critique a pair of apparently modest public library buildings by elevating their design intention in theoretical terms; they were to become the Lyons Corner Houses, Starbucks, or McDonald's of their day, the forerunners of a ubiquitous public sphere. However, it is important to be conscious of the overwhelmingly industrial environment surrounding their inception and their consequent position with regard to Morris's pro-craft demand for 'truth to materials' or Muthesius's optimism for the potential of mass production. Two apparently contrasting examples of prototypical Carnegie branch libraries force a reflection upon these stated European conceptions. Indeed, set in the global manufacturing capital of the time, were they poised to deliver the ultimate 'functional' destination to which such philosophies might aspire? Did they leapfrog a stage in development or does their decorative attire denote that they lagged behind?

Seemingly, the design of Homewood branch library, closest to Carnegie's own residential area of Pittsburgh, was considerably more elaborate than those he provided in neighbouring districts. Indeed, compared with South Side, as the subsequent and final branch to be built, it cost more than twice as much to build and is significantly more ornate. However, designed by the same architects, Alden and Harlow, its detailed drawings reveal that a shared set of provisions was maintained for every branch library they designed in Pittsburgh, despite their varied level of finish. This period in architecture is pivotal in terms of both technological possibility and the visual portrayal of modernity. Pittsburgh, then an industrial capital of the world, was also fostering the development of the prototypical branch library. However, the seemingly unselfconscious experimentation with architectural language kept this step-change in advancement out of the spotlight of modernist aspirations. It is well known that Carnegie's secretary, James Bertram's ideal library plans were used to dictate Carnegie library designs in the US. Even in the UK, architects' competition-winning designs were sent to Bertram for comment and approval. As a background, branch librarians' reports describe the library context through its clientele in every instance.

Consequently, it is possible to see that the conventions of his library plans that would be absorbed internationally had principles of design that had been developed in Pittsburgh.

The proliferation of Carnegie libraries globally demands reference to the city. Bobinski's thesis first drew focus to the Carnegie Corporation of New York archives,⁷ illustrating Carnegie's assistant, James Bertram's 'Notes on Library Bilding' library plans of 1911.⁸ Koch's portfolio of Carnegie library buildings and book follow the procurement process of the New York libraries in detail.⁹ More recent work by Jones and Van Slyck adds critical appraisals from the perspective of architectural history.¹⁰ More specifically, Floyd focuses on the work of Longfellow, Alden and Harlow.¹¹ Ralph Munn's unpublished PhD thesis provides a history of the Pittsburgh Libraries.¹² As Director of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh from 1928 to 1964, his reports with John Barr on Public library service in New Zealand¹³ and subsequently with Ernest Pitt in Australia commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation of New York,¹⁴ demonstrate the geographical extent from which Pittsburgh experience was exported.

Following two initial Carnegie library buildings in the Pittsburgh area by other architects, Longfellow, Alden and Harlow (later Alden and Harlow) beat ninety-seven other entrants to win what has been described as the largest architectural competition to date in America¹⁵ for the design of the main Carnegie Library in Pittsburgh which opened in 1895. They designed a further eight branches in the city. Their original design drawings are held in the facilities management department of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. The object of this study is to demonstrate through an examination of certain components detailed in these drawings, the refinement of a global recipe for public library architecture as a kit of parts betrayed through evidence of their approach to detailed design. The questions it asks are whether such a gradation of components would have any serious impact on library use and how the legibility of the architectural hierarchy of these buildings might affect their social impact as public rooms.

The Pittsburgh context

Pittsburgh, sited at the coal-rich convergence of the Ohio, Monongahela, and Allegheny rivers in pre-railroad America, was an inland port of unparalleled significance. Carnegie's steel railway tracks were to exploit these resources and rapidly traverse the continent at a critical period. At the same time, his steel beams and universal construction sections became standard components of the skyscrapers emerging across America. The steelworkers and customers of his libraries were drawn from all parts of Europe to form often distinct communities perched in clusters among the city's hills.

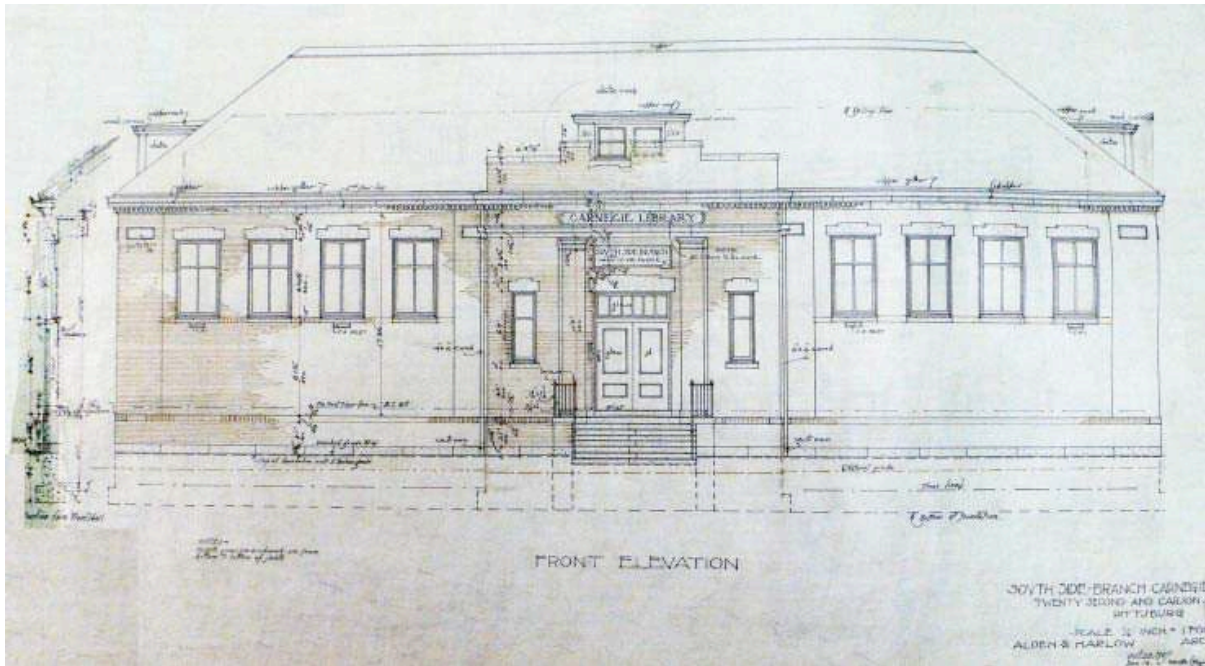


figure 4 Alden and Harlow, Southside Library Elevation (1909). Courtesy of Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.

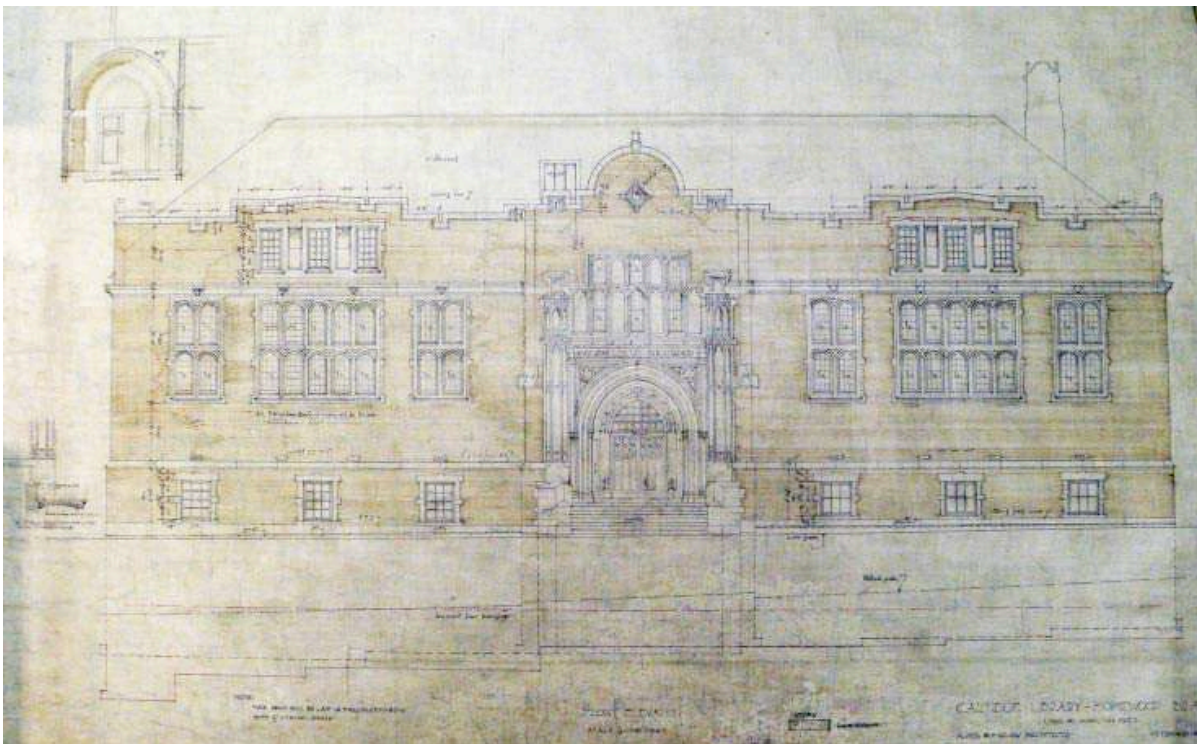


figure 5 Alden and Harlow, Homewood Library Elevation (1910). Courtesy of Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.

The difference in design between the last two Carnegie branch libraries to be built in Pittsburgh, South Side in 1909 (Figure 4) and Homewood in 1910 (Figure 5), show how a range of architectural messages was delivered through a young but already well-understood and systematic approach to library design. Homewood was sited in a wholly residential area, close to Carnegie's one-time home¹⁶ whereas South Side,

or 'Old Birmingham', was a more central mixed industrial neighbourhood.

A comparison between the two lends itself to an evaluation in both functional and quantified terms. However, it also draws us to make visual comparisons regarding their ostensibly very different appearance. Although the later of the two, Homewood is seemingly the more regressive or traditional. This Gothic elaboration apparently contrasts with the emerging modernist aspiration that:

Architecture, like all other artworks, must seek its essence in content to which the external appearance must adapt. We must also insist that its external form serve only to mirror its inner essence, whereby the kind of formal detailing, 'the architectural style', plays a minor role — if not wholly insignificant.¹⁷

However, looking carefully at the buildings in detail may challenge this assumption.

Homewood cost more than twice as much to build as South Side¹⁸ but was also by far the largest Pittsburgh branch.¹⁹ However, although the net area of the Homewood Library floor is double that of South Side (10 048 sq. ft or 933 m² compared with 4922 sq. ft or 457 m²), the building cost per unit area was in fact cheaper for Homewood. This is an important point, because Bertram would later place so much emphasis on the deployment of economy in library design; 'TO OBTAIN FOR THE MONEY THE UTMOST AMOUNT OF EFFECTIV ACCOMMODATION, CONSISTENT WITH GOOD TASTE IN BILDING'.²⁰ He regularly criticized projects that he perceived to be overtly ornamental, as if his favoured adoption of Melville Dewey's (Melvil Dui's) principle of simplified spelling should also be applied to the grammar of ornament in architecture. The fact that South Side was in fact more expensive to build per unit area is in part because it is simply a smaller building. However, the observation does demonstrate that whereas ornamentation might make reference to a higher order of traditional wealth, a plainer aesthetic would not necessarily in fact be any more economical to deliver.

The buildings have witnessed a colossal expansion and contraction in the size of the city they serve. The population of Pittsburgh was 307 484 in 2011, fairly similar to the figure of 321 616 inhabitants living there in 1900. However, in the decade leading up to the erection of these buildings, the population had risen to 533 905 in 1910, Pittsburgh was then the eighth biggest city in the US. The population continued to rise, peaking in 1950 with 676 806 people, more than double the current number.²¹ As a consequence, the endurance of these functioning library buildings is perhaps even more remarkable. Homewood Library had a mezzanine inserted in the late twentieth-century but was restored in a refurbishment by Pfaffman Associates in 2004.²² South Side has only recently been refurbished for the first time, by Loysen and Kreuthmeier in 2011–12.

The libraries were to have similar circulation rates, numbers of books, adult and child attendance totalling around 14 000–20 000 visitors per month in the year that they opened. Although overall these figures have dropped over the last century, reflecting the 43 per cent decline in the city population²³ and other factors common to library attendance more broadly, the two branches remain similar to one another in attendance and circulation today.²⁴

Architectural identity: the reading room and the open stacks

Historically, public libraries extended the public arena into an area whose only architectural precedents were generally derived from the precedents of private or privileged rooms; universities, private libraries, and monasteries. Similarly, Hoberman's recent study of the impact and confusion that Edwardian museums introduced to the public realm highlights the awkwardness with which the privilege of connoisseurship would be shared.²⁵ In general terms, reading rooms of the new public libraries provided a novel type of public space which invited people to enjoy individual experience within a shared interior akin to the drawing room of a grand house (Figure 6). However, as has been discussed, they also sought to attract and channel customers with the benefit of rigorous systems of refining their market awareness.²⁶



figure 6 South Side Branch, General Reading Room. Courtesy of Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.

Various dispositions of furniture in rooms and equipment were used to encourage people to adopt certain postures; standing and reading, browsing slowly, sitting at a table. The set out of open stacks determined a sequential perambulation. As a result their spatial organization internally can be compared with both the free browsing of a contemporary street or market scene. The difference between the layout of Homewood and South Side libraries demonstrates the development of this idea. South Side entrusted the browser by offering less viewable but more comfortable parallel aisles to browse within, whereas Homewood returned to the well-established precedent of radial stacks, enabling the Librarian clear sight of the visitor (Figures 7 and 8).

At South Side, a new spatial experiment was made, moving library design further towards the navigable lines of a supermarket: 'the distinctive change being the use of a rectangular stack room with wall shelving and stacks set parallel to each other, instead of the semicircular stack room with radial stacks used in the

past'.²⁷ It is important to remember that although book stacks had been arranged in this simple rectilinear manner in closed access libraries since the eighteenth century, it was a significant shift to offer such capacity and convenience in an open-access environment as it risked the librarian losing sight of the borrower.

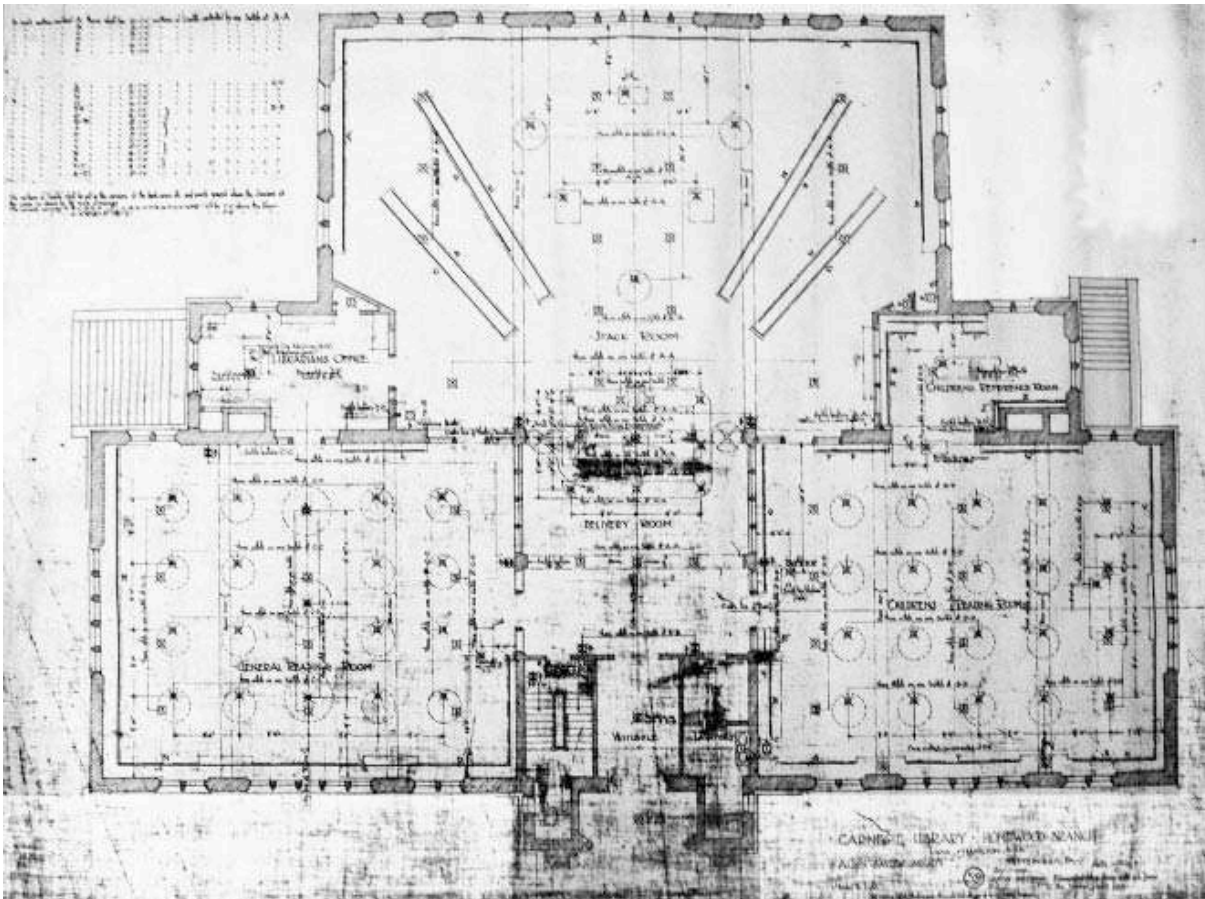


figure 7 Homewood Library Plan. Courtesy of Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.

The difference in the location of the two libraries reflects the disparate racial and economic demography of Pittsburgh, whose hilly topography fostered such divisions. Wall described Homewood as located in a valley belonging to an estate that was gently becoming more populated during the second half of the nineteenth century. It 'had once been part of a large estate owned by Judge William Wilkins, who still lived in his mansion at the centre of the suburb'.²⁸ That the site for Homewood Library had originally been selected by a wealthy man as the location for his home implies a quality of place that is in contrast with the more industrial location of South Side Library. The emerging architecture of the Homewood neighbourhood was characterized by detached houses, whereas the older and more commercial setting of South Side had a more substantial and continuous street frontage (Figures 9 and 10). The Homewood Board in 1911 described local parents requiring home visits to sign library cards as relatively comfortably off:

almost entirely Italian, there being a colony of them in the Homewood district. In fact they are the strongest foreign element and almost the only class amongst whom there is much poverty or need. There are also some negroes in the Frankstown Avenue district. The majority of our constituency, however, is made up of plain, comfortable middle class people, who are most desirous of their

children's advancement.²⁹

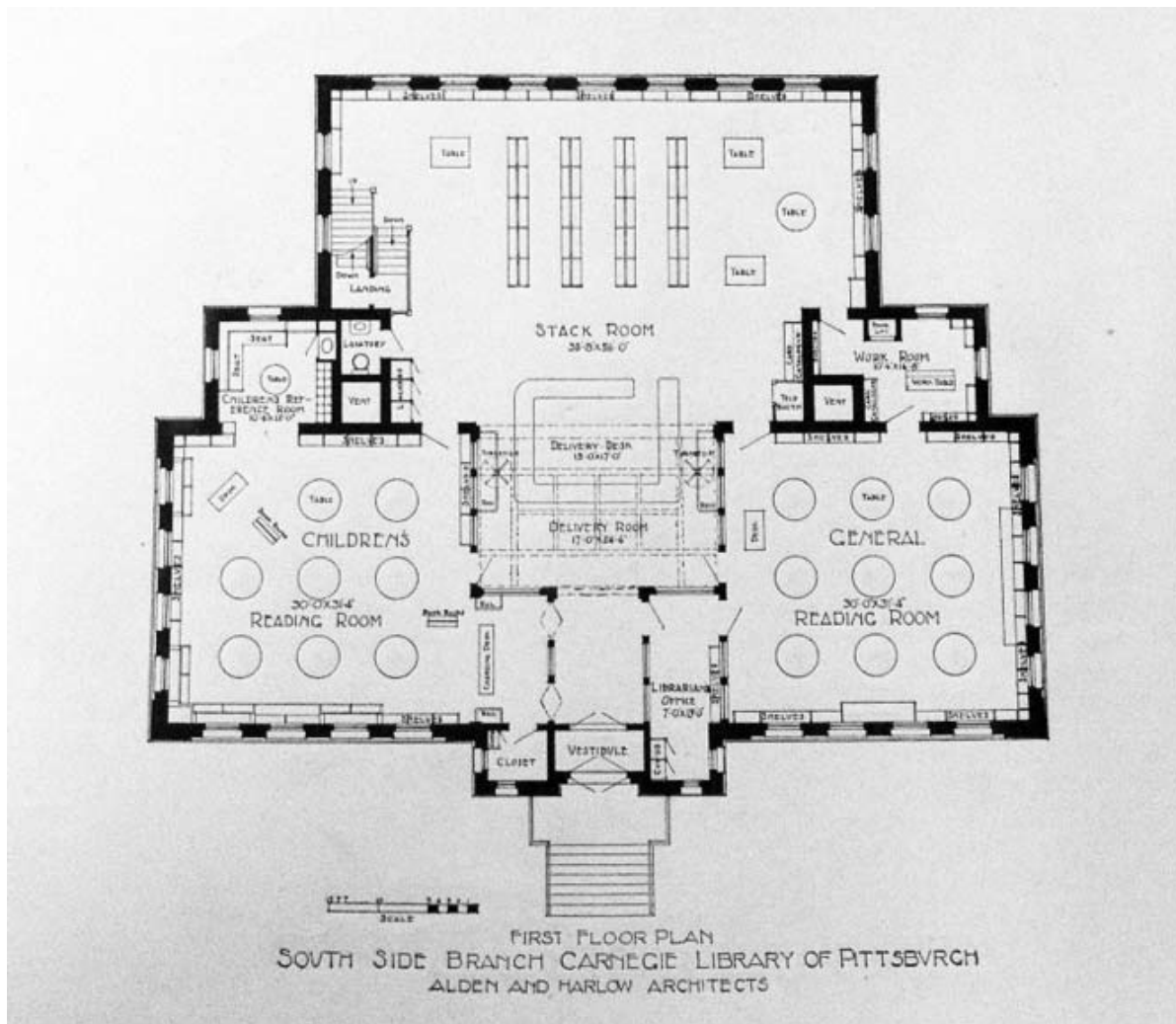


figure 8 Southside Library Plan. Courtesy of Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.

South Side was a much older and more urban settlement of Pittsburgh, said to have first been settled in 1770.³⁰ The clientele were significantly more racially mixed and the Library was located in a working area. By contrast to Homewood, the Librarian there implied a very different outlook for its younger visitors:

Many of the children go to work as soon as they are 14 years of age, and in the evenings we see many of these, the girls who work in the factories and mills are most often boisterous, loud and ill-mannered and the boys under-sized, chew and smoke vigorously but are easy to interest.³¹



figure 9 View from the South Side Slopes (1909). Courtesy of University of Pittsburgh Archives Service Center.



figure 10 Homewood Area (1908). Courtesy of Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.

It is clear from many instances of Carnegie grant applications held in the Carnegie Corporation Archive at Columbia that in making an application for a library grant in the early days of his philanthropy, the appeal had to be directed to meet the prerequisite sympathies of the giver himself. Even in his own one-time neighbourhood, and despite the fact that Carnegie had, very unusually, paid for the site,³² Carnegie was fervently lobbied by the Board of Trade to increase the building grant from the proposed \$60 000 to \$150 000. There is no evidence of such activity on behalf of the people of South Side. It might be reasoned from this that the people of Homewood received a building that they had conspired to achieve whereas at South Side, they were donated a designated gift. The involvement of the articulate and relatively well-heeled Homewood Board of Trade in a campaign for the grant and the fact that they did not need to find funds to purchase a site is likely to have significantly heightened their ability to influence the design brief and may well be the root of the ambition for a more ornate design than that of South Side.

At Homewood, the Librarian pleaded: 'The people are daily clamouring for a Carnegie library [...] A treasure house for culture and progress'.³³ One reason for the increased expense of Homewood was for the provision of a basement hall: 'There are hundreds of young men and women in this community who are without a convenient and commodious Hall in which to hold musical and literary entertainments'.³⁴ At South Side by contrast, a prescription was made on the reader's behalf: Councilman W. H. Weber stated at its opening: 'The South Side people get all the physical exercise they need [...] but what they need is the mental exercise'.³⁵ Anxious to attract customers, librarians posted placards in the neighbouring Jones and Laughlin mill 'Books for Men in the Shop; Books for men in the Office'. As a result the Library was described as over-subscribed within days of its opening.³⁶ Attendance was recorded as 10 497 in the first ten days with circulation of 6460 volumes out of 9000.³⁷ Whereas these contrasting conditions make the differing architectural approach more understandable, the initial performance of the libraries was clearly unaffected.

The legibility of architectural components

Homewood Library has a clubhouse feel and spatial generosity that exceeds that of any of the other Pittsburgh Carnegie branch libraries. The detailed Gothic stone dressings on the exterior and richly panelled interior convey a level of comfort that exceeds that offered by its more pared-down companions. Co-ordinated polished pressed brass fingerplates reflect the portcullis motif of the door and invite the visitor to touch the gleaming quality of the building's fabric. Nevertheless, these decorative items may still be identified as parts of an architectural kit. Pittsburgh, as one of the first truly global manufacturing megacities, naturally provides a particular context for the understanding of an architecture assembled from component parts. It is no accident that Andy Warhol is a child of the city and would be the first artist to identify repetitive elements as a global cultural phenomenon. Yet visually the Carnegie library legacy is far removed from the imaginings of European architects such as Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius who provocatively later tied such notions of industrialization to architectural ambitions in the early twentieth century.

A road named Hot Metal Street runs adjacent to South Side Library identifying the function of the place. Society itself in the industrial context of South Side was described in terms of its working relationship to various components. Three local newspapers in 1909 each listed the trades of library visitors on a single day:

Door-puller, pull-up, carry-in, puddler, bolt maker, conductor, errand-boy, firemen, messenger boy, weigh-master, boxmaker, office boy, policeman, leverman, office cleaner, watchman, link heater, express driver, dressmaker, driver, machinist, cash girl, house painter, milliner, plumber, starcher, toy painter.³⁸

The rhythmic list of people, recognized only by their occupation, alludes to a man-made world of functional parts all engaged in one fragment of a creative whole. The reports sought to prove the efficacy of the library in reaching the working man. Today the list simply provides a snapshot of the working life of a city wholly participating in the means of production. Within this context, the fact that the design of buildings was to be assembled from a set of tried and tested components able to function predictably in tested arrangements but embellished at will sets a design methodology quite in contrast to the stated aims of the modern movement in Europe.

The façade and manners of the entrance

By the time the libraries were built, a highly sophisticated level of functional decorum - a kit of architectural devices for library design, had been devised. However, at Homewood the exterior had ostensibly reverted to indulge in a language of deftly castellated Old-World references. Spatially, however, the logic of the library system remains relentlessly functional. Both libraries are sited on street corners and have a projecting pedimented central nave flanked by two square reading rooms with a stack room behind. Their main floor area is raised above street level both for pragmatic reasons of admitting light to the lower floor at Homewood but also to repeat the well practiced assertion of their single-storey identity amongst other neighbouring buildings (Figures 11 and 12).

Nevertheless, it is clear that they were cast from the same, by now well refined mould. Unlike many classical buildings, the decorum of the grand entrance is readily and sensibly manipulated to exploit spatial opportunities. In plan, for example, at Homewood, the lavatories are neatly assigned to occupy the core of each of the apparent Gothic buttresses flanking the entrance door. In this sense, the ornament is sparingly distributed as a highlight or a dressing, an optional trim that is clipped on, the spatial arrangement remaining utterly functional. The same principle is deployed at South Side to widen the visual emphasis of the entrance externally but also to store the WC and provide the librarian's office with a direct view of the entry.

The double-doored lobby, a necessity in the harsh climate of Pittsburgh, is extended to enclose a gently raking flight of steps at Homewood whereas at South Side the steps are left outside and the vestibule is reduced to the minimum length of a door swing. The generosity offered by the provision of slowly ascending risers and the warm sheltered brass handrails at Homewood are perhaps its most distinguishing features in contrast to South Side. The steeply ascending steps at South Side were set out to meet the tightness of the site and have subsequently been replaced with accessible ramps and steps at ninety degrees meeting modern requirements. The approach as originally designed sought to maintain the processional decorum of more generous buildings at a minimum of cost.

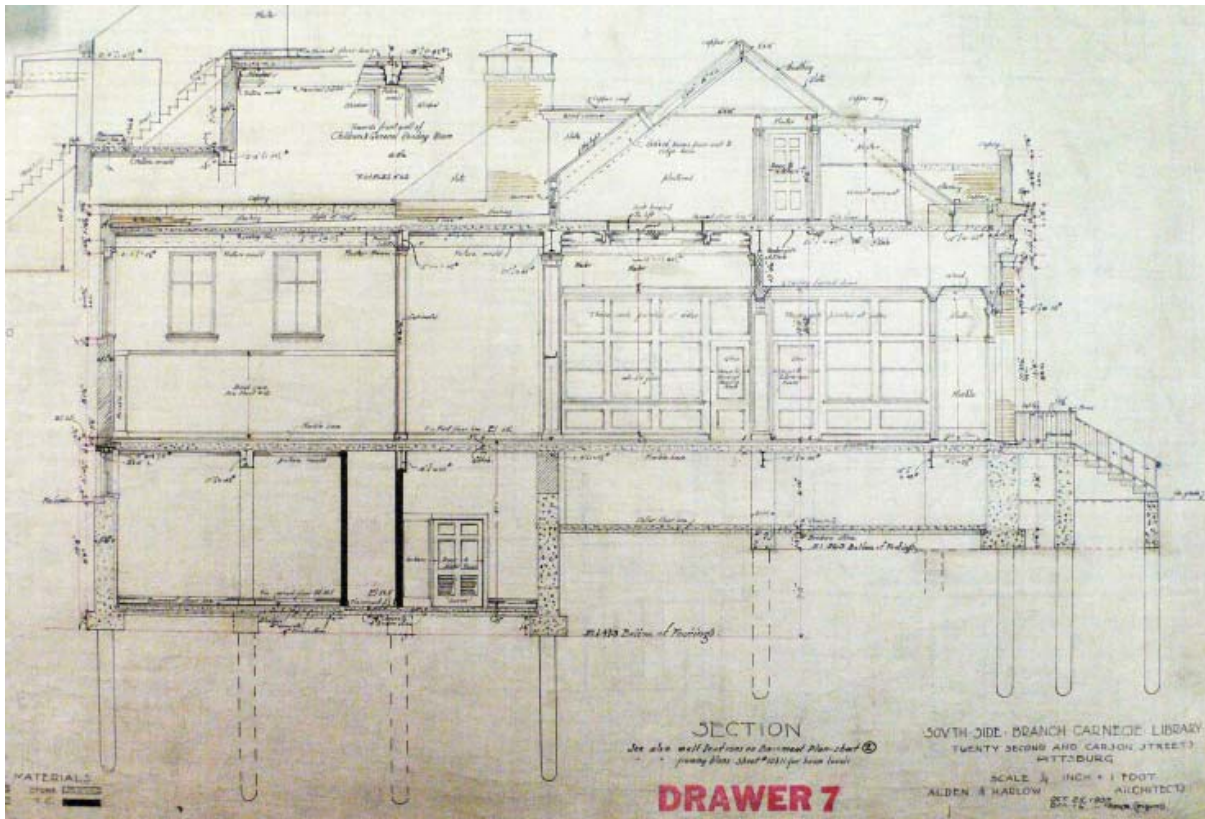


figure 11 South Side Library Section. Courtesy of Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.

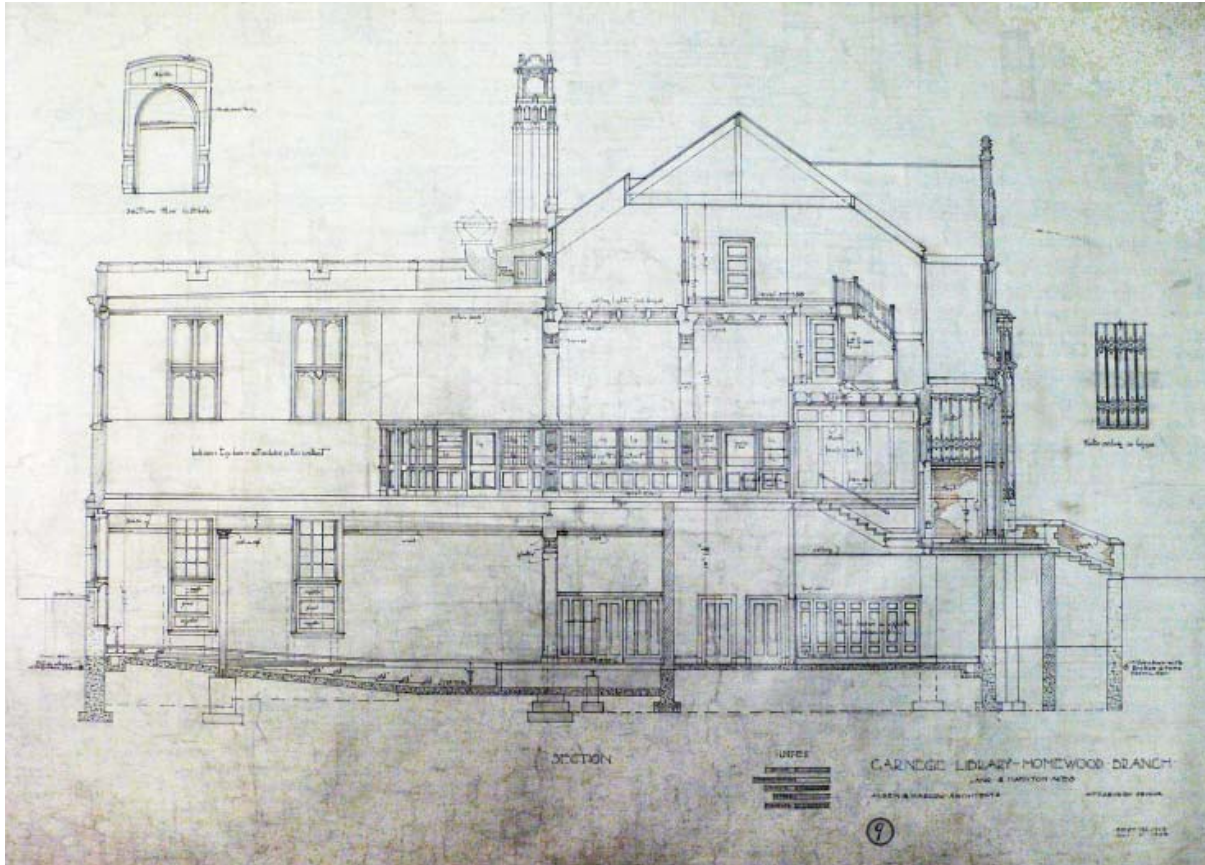


figure 12 Homewood Library Section. Courtesy of Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.

The children's room

As Van Slyck emphasized, Carnegie's contribution in extending the library remit to children is one of the programme's most significant achievements.³⁹ At Homewood an average of 400–500 children attended story hour in 1911. The Librarian's report illustrates its popularity: 'Our attendance runs between 4 and 5 hundred children, and when there are only three story-tellers to take care of this number the groups are so large that of necessity the children's ages vary too much'.⁴⁰ In both libraries miniaturized fittings, magazine racks, tables, wash closets, acoustic screens and faithful replication of the statement of decorum that is set out for adults is clearly replicated for children. Photographs demonstrate that the miniaturized design approach is still successful in inspiring children to visit today (Figure 13). Both libraries provide the same kit of parts. Looking at the detailed drawings of Alden and Harlow, these fixtures, made of the same materials and to the same specification as those of adults, used the play of scaled drawing and more efficient means of repetition to reiterate the adult world to a smaller audience. Some features, such as hand-washing stations and story rooms, were unique to children but the majority of the fixtures offered children the capacity to mimic their adult counterparts and to feel equally valued within their public realm. The transparent screens between the equally sized adult and children's reading rooms in both buildings allowed them to observe this architectural gift just as much as it allowed the librarian to observe them.

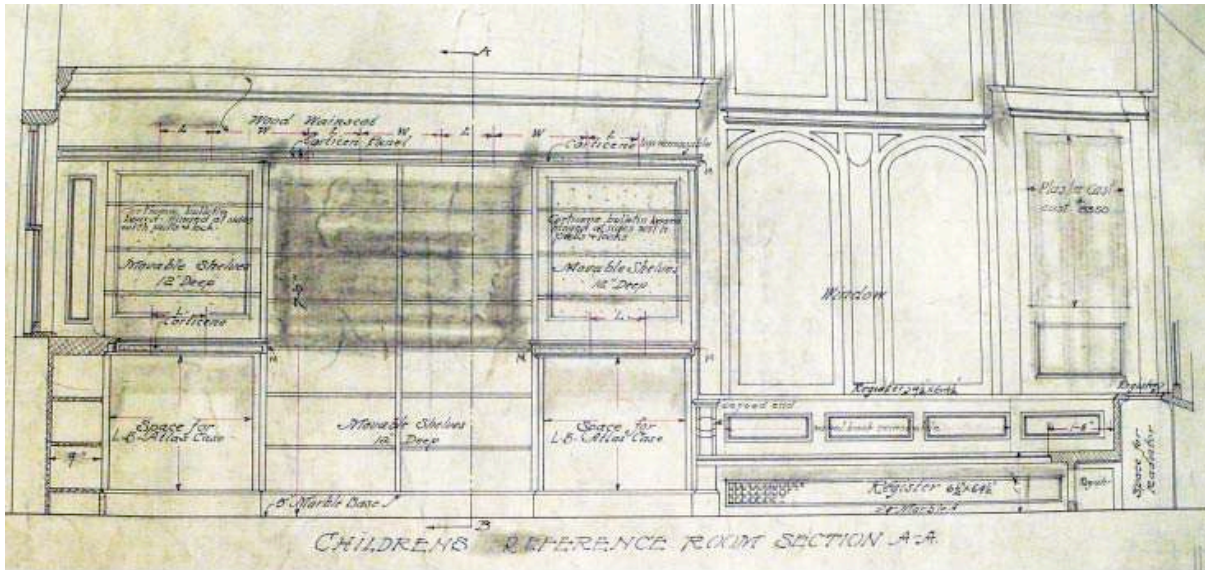


figure 13 Alden and Harlow, Homewood children's reference room, elevation detail. Courtesy of Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh and the author.

The structure, the furniture and the finish

Both buildings make use of the locally produced steel framing within the envelope of their masonry external walls to provide wide structural spans in the same way that locally sourced timber might have been used a century previously. A section through the entry hall at Homewood reveals how these structural beams are decoratively concealed (Figure 14). The hierarchy of economy in the South Side scheme is

reflected in the lean steel construction of a caretaker's stair that rises out of the main lending library, however, this further thriftiness is not passed on to the customers. It is evident that the building was not understood as ungenerous or mean. At its opening, 390 people attended during a blizzard. Papers reported that the building had a 'comfortable and cheerful interior [. . .] it was a neighbourly gathering'.⁴¹

The loose furniture for both libraries, specially designed by the architects continued the strategy of extending undiminished provision to children. In the architect's details, they simply note the quantities and dimensional alterations for each piece of furniture to be provided in either the adults' or children's room. Strangely, it is in the provision of furniture and its detail that the two libraries are most comparable. It might have been anticipated that the leaner looking, half-price library at South Side would have achieved its savings by cutting back on the fixtures and fittings. This proves not to be the case. The embellishment of mouldings on what they refer to as 'wall furniture', skirtings, cornices, and architraves is indeed greater at Homewood but the principle is absolutely consistent. Just as with the external stone dressings, the internal decoration proves in itself to be minimal, no more than a clip-on signifier or a different motif applied to a diligently tested and refined model.

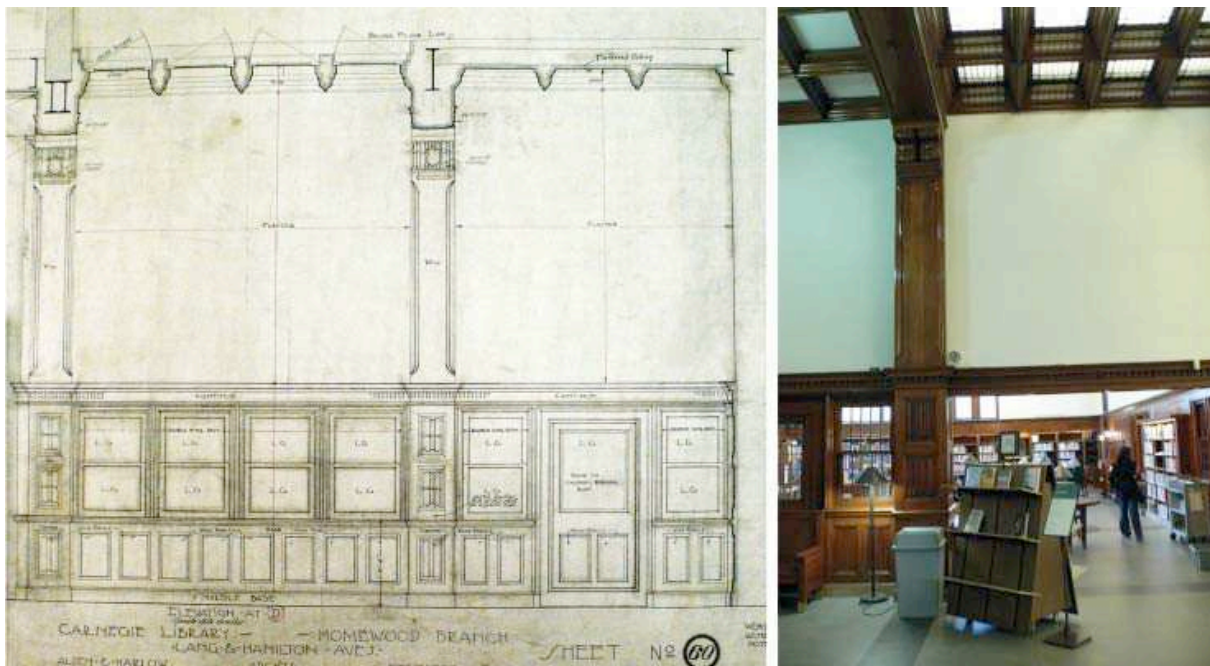


figure 14 Alden and Harlow, Homewood Library, Hallway and Detail Section. Courtesy of Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh and the author.

Conclusion

Although South Side was not the last of the Carnegie branch libraries in Pittsburgh, it appears that of the two, it demonstrates a closer cohesion to modern principles of design. It is more progressive in its layout, more stripped-down in its lack of ornament and simple efficiency of detail than Homewood. Despite apparently being more spartan and less glamorous, it was no cheaper to build per square foot than its seemingly grander counterpart. Looking systematically at the elements of the buildings, their attributes can be ticked off a list as complying with a set of well-understood requirements (Figure 15). The

two buildings appear to sit either side of Muthesius's modernist ambition:

In summary, our contemporary aesthetic-tectonic orientation may perhaps be seen in the fact that instead of developing purely external ornament that stands in no immediate relation to the essence of the thing, we now strive decisively toward functional design. Yet also seek to present this form — more symbolically than practically — with a handsome elegance and a certain consciousness of form.⁴²

However, considering the ornament of Homewood as more than a code of dress but as a finely integrated and rationalized set of components, demonstrates that the conception of the building and its deployment of ornament was more rigorous than might at first be assumed. Habermas in the 1980s criticized the distinction between architect and engineer in designing ornamental façade and functional back for many late nineteenth-century buildings,⁴³ yet the ornament and functional arrangement of these buildings is manifestly combined.

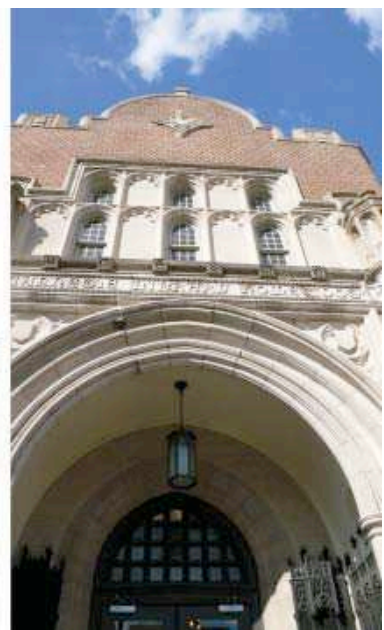


figure 15 South Side and Homewood Libraries. Courtesy of the author.

At South Side, as well as at Homewood the boundaries of functionality were evidently well understood. The elaborate detail of the decorative façade at Homewood was not in fact translated fully to the interior. Relatively generous minimum standards of furnished rooms were maintained for adults and children alike in both schemes. Whereas South Side remains the better exemplar of the Carnegie phenomenon refined to anticipate more readily the modern movement that was to employ so much masonry-clad steel in years to follow, the reactionary traditionalist fantasy offering of Homewood predicates an even later development in architectural referencing that we may well understand more closely today. It is perhaps therefore unsurprising that among the city's changing demographic tides, it was the apparently unfashionable architecture of Homewood that suffered from unsympathetic modernization. Having now been restored, its original design is earning recognition and admiration in the twenty-first century. That

the use and interpretation of South Side has sailed on more durably, having only just had its first refurbishment 101 years after it opened, implies it was better dressed to weather the twentieth century.

Notes

- ¹ J. Habermas, 'Modern and Post-Modern Architecture', *9H*, 4 (1982), p. 10.
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